Flash Forums and ForumReader: Legitimately surfing Slashdot and other time-wasters at work

Kushal Dave and his co-authors present an interesting and promising project in Forum Reader. Their exploration of "flash forums" -- which sprout and die as time sensitive posts are made on news sites' attached forums and similar sites -- provides a view of a popular style of social interaction not discussed by many other researchers. Characterized by diverse authorship, large size, focused scope and constrained lifespans, flash forums are distinct from Usenet groups or other persistent forums. Dave and his team attempt to improve the readability of these sites, whose discussions can quickly spiral away from easy navigability into a mushy and often barely moderated mess.

Dave's team provides several tools to assist in flash forum navigation, including word searches, highlighting, coloring posts according to various criteria, and a thumbnail view of the whole discussion currently in the user's view. The coloring can be made to highlight newer posts, more highly moderated posts, or posts from a certain author. In flash forums, highly moderated posts are typically visually prominent – taking a position near the top of the page (as in Reddit.com) or by being visible by default (as in Slashdot.org), so I expected the coloring feature to be rated as non-useful, but the users in Dave's test group rated the coloring by moderation highly. The trait of diverse authorship led me to expect that the color-by-author would also be rated as unhelpful, and it was.

The authors of Flash Forums and ForumReader: Navigating a New Kind of Large-scale Online Discussion barely mentions anonymity in Slashdot – the only mention is in the caption of a chart – despite a large portion of the authorship neglecting to log in or create a user profile when posting on their forums. While they explicitly stated that authorship was less of an issue in flash forums, I thought that it deserved at least some mention.

The thumbnail view, which I expected to be rated quite highly was well received, and was the last of the highly useful features. When combined with the wear/footprinting feature, the graphical map provided a compelling visualization of the flash forum as a whole. By seeing where they have been and which threads generated the most interest, users can decide which of the discussions on the page are worth their time.
**CodeSaw: The Visualization that could have been a Pro Wrestler**

CodeSaw represents the development process of open source projects by tracking overall code addition as well as discussion over long periods of time. By including the conversations as well as the code base in the visualization, Gilbert and Karahalios provide much deeper insight into the inner workings of the project team than either alone would have. The simple lines and colors are easy to read, and the small multiples of each set of information help put the contribution of each individual agent into perspective.

The authors thought that seeing the ebb and flow of overall contributions and how one fits into the development team would create a sense of closeness among a team, but it surprisingly did just the opposite in some cases. In projects with small numbers of contributors, developers reported an increased sense of loneliness – removing even the sense of community derived from project forums or bug reports. Combating this sensation with the addition of messages on the visualization itself seems like a potentially beneficial step, but in the situation of a main contributor, leaving messages only for oneself might serve to increase, not diminish loneliness.

One of the potential benefits of this tool, as mentioned by the authors, is that it can spur competition between developers, or conversely, spark inspiration in the hearts of otherwise laggardly project members.

The visuals themselves are clean, easy to read, and convey information well. Without even looking at the descriptions I was able to read the progress of a project within only a few seconds and began to make guesses about when releases occurred and when setbacks were encountered. Looking at the visualization, I half expected an aural representation of the data to accompany the visual representation. I would be intrigued to hear what the development cycle of a complex open source project would sound like if each contributor were given a note or chord, and varying levels of contribution would correspond to varying volume.
Bridging the Gap: Colons are very important in research paper titles as well as blog posts

Herring and her co-authors attempt to identify blogs' position in the electronic ecosystem and characterize their properties with respect to offline genres. Consistent with its statement of purpose, the paper stayed mostly in the realm of classification, and branched into analysis only occasionally, and then not too deeply. Herring confirmed many people's feelings about blogs – that they are most often the spout of a self-involved individual's stream of thoughts on their own life. This explains the current (extremely) low percentage of blogs with large readerships, given that most are written by untrained and often uninteresting authors (I am certainly not biased against or annoyed by the genre at all, not even a little). Blogs that act as filters, pre-surfing the internet for interesting content are more palatable, but have largely been made obsolete by social bookmarking and news sites such as del.icio.us and reddit. K-logs fill a slightly more interesting role – presenting a purportedly expert view on a topic or topics, and giving the curious or related researchers a touch point for communication on a given topic.

The authors make note of how much personal information is shared by blog owners, which given the often extremely personal nature of the content in the posts themselves is unsurprisingly common, with more than 2/3 authors identifying themselves on their front page. While reading about the daily life of friends can be insightful and can enhance or modify real-world relationships, reading the same posts about strangers elicits very little interest from the Internet readership as a whole (unless taken in aggregate to predict the moves of the stock market).

Given that blogs are predominantly personal journals, Herring and her co-authors conclude that in fact they are not native to the Internet, but have proceeded naturally from hand-written journals of yore.

As a side note, writing on internet ecology really exposes how much internet terminology has yet to find its way into word processor spell-check dictionaries, despite years of consistent use online and in academic and professional communities. Does Internet really need a capital I, and does on line really need a space?